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“Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee”*: giving voice to planning practitioners

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Introduction

Planning schools follow a more or less similar path in educating young practitioners as true guardians of “public interest.” Although planning theory and education define certain ideal roles for planners along this path (e.g. provider of equal access to urban services, distributor of rights to the city, facilitator, negotiator, reflective practitioner, mediator, decision-maker), the actual role of the practicing planner is shaped by the changing contemporary conditions of political economy. We often describe these as neoliberalism, market-led urban development, opportunism, entrepreneurialism, consumerism, financialization, and so on. The rules of the game in the city are defined by these forces, which influence not only the main field of action in planning, but also the experiences of planners in practice. While planning students are taught to be the guardians of the public interest, in the face of the power relations that are shaped by these dynamics, planners usually lack the power to fulfill that role, which surely frustrates them (Forester, 1982).

The gap between academic and practitioner understandings of practice, as well as the challenges faced in planning education, have been the subject of several different studies in planning (Balducci & Bertolini, 2007; Bertolini et al., 2012; Hurley et al., 2016; Innes de Neufville, 1983). The more the gap has widened between how academics perceive the action field of planning and the true reality, the more alienated and even politicized the planning practitioner has become (Penpecioglu & Tasan-Kok, 2016). Ongoing work (Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2017) shows that, despite the challenges, there exist “boundary-pushing practitioners” around the world who explore new planning practice methods following their own coping mechanisms, activism and creativity to get around barriers and problems. It is these people that are the subject of this *Interface*. As you will discover from reading their reflections collected here, their modes of practice offer something from which we can and must learn.

In this *Interface*, I bring together essays that each offer a critical reflection on the major challenges faced by planning practitioners. I was particularly interested in the coping mechanisms developed by practitioners to deal with major challenges to their profession, such as authoritarianism, neoliberalism, informality, crime, fragmentation and transition. Taking a constructive stance, it is my intention to show that we can learn from these coping mechanisms, and that there is a need for what they can teach us about new methods, instruments and ways of thinking. The invited authors, all practicing planners from different backgrounds, professional stances and career paths, were asked to write a specific reflection on the learning practices that they consider should be included in planning education.

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*Muhammad Ali (world heavyweight boxing champion).



In this way, *Interface* aims to provide a small window into the practitioners' world, but rather than making an interpretation of their methods in dealing with the challenges faced in practice, the intention is to let them speak freely about who they are, what they do, how they cope and how they try and make change possible. This is not intended as a collection of works representing different types of planners or their reflections, but rather an assemblage of evocative pieces written by reflective practitioners from different parts of the world, namely Belgium, Brazil, Israel, the Netherlands, South Africa, Sweden and Turkey. The contributors all face different challenges, different contexts, and different fields of action in their professional lives, but all are passionate about their work. They come from different backgrounds, both educational and professional, and include municipal planners, academics, representatives of professional organizations, private sector consultants and social planners, and employees of policymaking organizations. What unites them is their desire for social and environmental justice. They reflect on the reality in their own ways of fulfilling this dream through societal engagement, activism or simply by doing their jobs "differently". All of them are seeking a professional identity and are looking to reflect on what their role should be in urban policymaking, just as all have dynamic career trajectories with changing positions in the profession between disciplines, sectors, organizations and geographies. This *Interface* aims to share their experiences with planning scholars and practitioners; I am inspired by them, and offer them all my heartfelt thanks for taking part in this small experiment.

Urban planning may be one of the few professions that continuously searches for identity and definition of the field for its professionals. While there is a body of literature explaining how planning theoreticians and educators perceive the role of the planner (Albrechts, 1991; Ng, 2014; Siemiatycki, 2012), the voice of the practicing planner is barely heard, aside from John Forester's work (Forester, 1982, 1988, 1999, 2013), which is perhaps the most prominent example of bringing practitioners' voices to the fore, and a few recent studies with that particular aim (Fox-Rogers & Murphy, 2016). Despite the more or less similar educational principles and ethics taught in planning schools around the world, there is a vast diversity in the challenges faced in the field of planning that go beyond the imagination of planning schools (Tasan-Kok & Oranje, 2017). As educators, we do not (or perhaps cannot), simply put, equip young practitioners with the right instruments to deal with these unforeseen challenges, in that the challenges faced are too vague, too dynamic, too difficult to grasp and perhaps require a different set of skills than those that we anticipate planning practitioners should have. We give them an idea about what they may face in practice and provide them with a broad range of instruments, but we expect them to learn how to use them in practice. As a result, some of them fail in time, some enjoy the grey zones, and some become really creative in bypassing challenges in their own innovative ways.

Furthermore, the context in which planning finds its field of action has changed with the shift from the Keynesian to the market-driven political economic model. As a consequence, planners face a dilemma in their changing roles. We do not explain it in this way of course, but we expect them to "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee," to become change makers, ideologists, community heroes, justice distributors, deliberative or reflective practitioners, dreamers, and so on. But their real role requires them to be well-equipped bureaucrats or technocrats of some sort, who are able to safeguard public interest through their professional technical, legal and design knowledge. The current action field of planning, for instance, requires contractual relationships between public and private sector actors in order to regulate the increasing and active involvement of the private sector. Thus, beyond the usual action field, which includes plans and strategies, zoning decisions, vision documents, master plans, and so on, the planner has to learn how to make good (e.g. fair, strong, risk-free) legal deals, or at least know how to influence the contracts that regulate the main principles of large-scale property-led projects.

While planning decisions are implemented through fragmented projects articulated through sometimes vague strategic plans, there are also new forms of regulation and planning. Legal documents, for example, aimed at regulating market involvement in urban development at different scales, require planners to negotiate technical detail, and perhaps to work together with people with technical knowledge who do not share the same ideals. A new planner is, on the one hand, expected to work like (and to become) a technocrat and a bureaucrat when handling the contractual agreements and rigid technical requirements associated with dealing with the private sector. On the other hand, a planner's job remains as someone who fights for the rights of the city. Turkish planner Deniz Kimyon in this *Interface* collection speaks about "the swing between hope and hardship" when describing the feelings associated with this dilemma, which, as Mee-Kam Ng (2014) argues, may lead to the creation of "system-maintaining" and "system-transforming" intellectuals in the production of space. So true!

I asked the contributors to this *Interface* the following questions: Who are you? What challenges do you face in the practice of planning according to your daily experiences in your job/country context? What coping/bypass mechanisms have you developed or created to deal with these specific challenges? What makes you "happy" in your daily practice with planning? How should the practices of the planner be transferred to planning education? What message would you give to planning educators based on your experience in practice? As you will read below, some common trends can be seen in the responses of the authors to these questions, some of which highlighted the similar trajectories of self-reflection on the profession. First of all, in particular, the contributing planners from the public sector emphasized that they had limited influence, being a "small cog in the machinery," or even sometimes "mere spectators," while others believe that their impact in political activism and social entrepreneurship may be greater if they are in possession of the appropriate adaptive and responsive skills. All agree, however, that planners have to be creative within the boundaries of bureaucracy if they are to bypass its challenges; that they need to take proactive roles in using planning as a political tool, or even become an activist within the system; and that they need to create room for maneuver and learn from it. Moreover, quite opposite to the elitist (almost narcissistic) self-perception of the modernist planners of the past, contemporary practitioners seem to believe in the importance of collaboration, co-production and negotiation with diverse public and private sector actors and social groups.

But how? They all believe in collective articulation, proactive attitude and change, but while some pursue this change using their practical experience in the field to improve dynamics within their workplace, others use their social skills and networks outside the workplace in a form of activism. Others simply seek new approaches to pursuing their societal goals within the private sector. Each of the contributors has developed coping mechanisms and innovative methods to deal with challenges they face in their practice. Each has social drives alongside their career ambitions, and each uses different methods in achieving their goals.

Swedish practitioner Sandra Oliveira e Costa explains how she maneuvered her way through the mechanisms of public planning with creative solutions to push her original ideas aimed at increasing justice and social equity. Despite feeling like "a small cog in the machinery" at times, she learned that by taking small proactive steps, it is possible to lead change. Turkish planner Deniz Kimyon, having a similar dream, found herself in an active fight in the practice of planning in which she called upon the laws and regulations as part of the Chamber of Urban Planners. With a similar drive and approach, Brazilian Higor de Souza Carvalho suggests that planning can be a political tool for social reform when made part of a collective struggle. Following a similar path, Belgian practitioners Maarten Desmet, Tim Devos, and Seppe de Blust believe that planners can look for "room to maneuver" in order to stimulate innovation and induce change by playing an intermediary role between diverse actors, responding



tactically to cracks in the decision-making processes or countering official discourses. Israeli practitioner Hila Lothan also expresses the importance of communication among different interest groups and the collaboration of diverse disciplines, while Dutch planner Jimme Zoete shows that being aware of the limitations of the system can help the practitioner find solutions within the system by playing with the rules. Likewise, South African practitioner Peter Ahmad believes that with the right set of skills and products, planners can replace rigid “blueprint” planning.

I find it highly motivating and energizing to read these thought-provoking reflections, and I hope you will share my enthusiasm.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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